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ABSTRACT

Intended to help adult education teachers and administrators select the type of adult literacy program that works best for their students, this digest surveys nine different programs and discusses the assessment methods used for each program. The programs examined are: (1) Time to Read; (2) Center for Literacy program; (3) Federal Prison System program; (4) Project: LEARN; (5) City University of New York Adult Literacy program; (6) Greece Central School District Continuing Education program; (7) CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System); (8) Literacy Volunteers of America-Danbury, Connecticut program; and (9) California Literacy Campaign. (NKA)

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON READING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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DIGEST

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The Issue: Adult Literacy Assessment

by Elizabeth Metz

Literacy assessment is a multifaceted issue in adult education. Much of the problem occurs because there is no one definition of literacy. Currently, literacy seems to be equated with functional literacy, but does this mean illiterates can't function well enough to hold any job, or a particular job? Or, does it mean that they can't read prescription labels, warnings on household chemicals, labels in the grocery store, or street signs? Or, maybe it means they can't write a letter to a friend. There are almost as many definitions of functional illiteracy as there are adult illiterates because it is a personal issue. The common thread is the "desire to gain control of their lives" (Johnson, 1988, from Tuiman, 1987, quoting Luria, 1976).

The variety of definitions is reflected in the vast array of adult education programs such as those offered through public school districts, state education offices, Literacy Volunteers of American, Laubach, public libraries, industry, and the federal government tied to the Job Training Partnership Act and the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Health and Human Services, Interior, Justice, and Labor (Newman, 1986). Some programs are learner centered, some competency based and some job centered. The instructors may be anywhere on a continuum from volunteers who have received only a few hours' training to certified professional adult educators.

Assessment Methods?

How does one assess literacy under such circumstances? Chall states that "there are few tests specifically meant for adults (and) there seems to be a hesitation in using them" (quoted in French, 1987). One commonly used test, TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), until recently was normed on children and most are scored using grade level equivalents. This is a "legacy from our definition of literacy as a level of achievement" (French, 1987). French suggests that informal testing would be one direction to follow which would allow for a "more personal perspective." One common goal should be that "assessment integrates both curriculum and student-identified goals and needs" (Hines, 1988).

Some Adult Literacy Programs

Time to Read is a national volunteer literacy program designed by Time Inc. Tutoring programs, both group and one-on-one, are built around respect for the learner and his/her interests. The learner's progress is assessed through activity sheets, answer keys and recording forms. Pre-post reading tests and self-assessment instruments are also used. *Time to Read* considers that the "key to effective assessment of learner progress (is the) close interaction between tutors and learners" (Cardwell, 1988).

The Center for Literacy, Philadelphia, provides a curriculum based on the individual learner's goals, interests and needs. Underlying assumptions are that literacy is social and that the learners come with their own goals and objectives; have their own perception of literacy, teaching, and learning; develop ideas about literacy from assessment measures; and build expectations by the method of assessment. The *Center for Literacy* uses planning conferences during the intake session and every six months for assessment. Items such as the learner's everyday life, reading and writing strategies, interests, perceptions of reading and writing, and goals are taken into consideration. A portfolio of the learner's accomplishments and current work is kept and completion is measured in relation to the learner's goals. The advantages are felt to be: a direct translation to instruction, emphasis on what the learner can do, a focus on motivating personal goals, elimination of test anxiety, communication of respect, and the active role of the learner. The limitations are the lack of quantitative information, the time taken, and the need for

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greater staff expertise. (For a short-term longitudinal study of 76 adults enrolled in this program see Lytle and others, 1986.)

The Federal Prison System (Muth, 1988) reading programs are standardized test oriented. Inmates take the ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Examination) on entry into the system. If they score less than 8.0 (grade level) on any subtest, they are required to attend Adult Basic Education classes for 90 days. The problem the prison system has seen with the use of ABLE is that each institution develops its own program. There is a movement to a skills core curriculum that focuses on skills assessed by ABLE, although this has aroused some controversy.

Project: *LEARN*, Cleveland, (Oakley, 1988) uses volunteer tutors trained in the use of Laubach materials. (For a discussion of the Laubach program see Meyer and Keefe, 1988.) Assessment of learners begins at the intake interview through an attempt to see how well the learners can do the early lessons. The Project: *LEARN* personnel did a one-time study (1982-3) of the use of ABLE and found it to be time consuming and expensive. They also felt that the ABLE does not test what they teach, that their learners felt anxiety, and that the norming population did not match theirs. They are now using the WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test) and the learners' goals, which give them a baseline for later assessment (Oakley, 1988).

The *City University of New York Adult Literacy Program* (Oppenheim, 1988) specifies that standardized tests should be only one component of assessment. Student survey results, anecdotal reports, and the learner's own writing are included in assessment. The learner is given the TABE upon entry and after 100 hours of instruction. There is also a structured interview in which the learner's goals, preferred learning style, and learning objectives are noted. Currently, several other methods of assessment are being studied.

The *Greece Central School District Continuing Education Division*, North Greece, New York, also uses the TABE, as well as assessing their learners at entry through interviews by teacher/counselors. Both aspects are felt to be necessary, especially the informal and non-threatening interview. Assessment then becomes ongoing, using a diagnostic-prescriptive model (Rupert, 1988).

CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System) is used in all California programs that receive federal Adult Basic Education Act 306 funds. Assessment is "linked directly to (203) identified competency statements across a continuum of difficulty" (Rickard, 1988; Rickard and Stiles, 1985) which are updated annually. All the materials used in the program are coded to this list. When learners first enter the program, their needs and skills are assessed through an interview. They are then placed in an appropriate class and given the CASAS Pretest and post-tested after 100 hours of instruction. CASAS users feel that it works well, since all aspects of the program are integrated with the competencies. The difficulty has been in record keeping, a problem they hope to solve with use of a computerized management system.

The *Literacy Volunteers of America-Danbury, CT* assess all learners using LVA READ on entry and again after 6 months or 50 hours of instruction. The students are also asked what they want to accomplish. The tutor is encouraged to "constantly listen to expressed desires and needs as tutoring progresses" (Stark, 1988). Achievement of goals is measured not only through an objective instrument but also through the successful completion of a life skill. As tutors do not always record these latter achievements from failure to understand their importance, the program wants to develop competency-based education.

California Literacy Campaign is a statewide library-based program (Solorzano, 1988; Strong, 1986). Each site is encouraged to develop a program that fits the needs of its unique area. In response to the need for better learner assessment, the California Adult Learner Progress Evaluation Process (CALPEP) was developed to measure learner progress through changes in "learners' reading and writing habits, learner perceptions of reading and writing progress, and goal attainment" (Solorzano, 1988). CALPEP is utilized at entry and at six month intervals. Progress is charted by both tutors and learners.

Assessment Tools

From the above it is obvious there is a wide variance in assessment tools used and views of them. There does seem to be a general acknowledgement that what is available needs improvement. Standardized tests do not appear to be the answer as they are related to former failure, give a

one-sided view of a multi-sided problem, and often do not measure anything which pertains to the goals of the learner. Competency-based programs also have a similar problem as they tend to be imposed on a learner.

Assessment of the adult learner apparently needs to be on an informal basis. The cultural, physiological, psychological and educational characteristics of the learner should be noted through a series of informal interviews over a period of several sessions. Learner interests and goals should be discussed on an ongoing basis by the tutor and learner.

While these methods of assessment will probably take more time than a standardized test and formal intake interview, the results would be worth the extra time. Rapport would be built between learner and tutor, the self-image of the learner would be enhanced, and the goals and needs of the individual learner would be met. Success would be built into the program. Progress would be noted as each goal of the learner is reached and new goals would be established as part of an ongoing assessment program.

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